

***- H.R. 2292, The Pay Veterans First Act, Will Hold 2007 Bonuses on Hold until Claims Backlog Reduced Substantially -***

***- Senior VA Officials Rewarded with 'Most Lucrative' Performance Bonuses in Government While Veterans Wait for Benefits -***

Washington, DC – Today Congressman John Hall (D-NY19) introduced H.R. 2292, The Pay Veterans First Act, which will freeze fiscal year 2007 bonuses set to be paid to senior level Veterans Affairs Department officials unless the VA has reduced its backlog of benefit cases to fewer than 100,000 claims.

"It is shocking and scandalous even by the VA's own low standards that top officials at the VA would be getting the most lucrative performance bonuses in government when there is a backlog of over 600,000 benefits claims," said Hall.

Hall serves as Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. His legislation comes in light of revelations reported by The Associated Press that senior officials received more than \$3.8 million as performance bonuses in 2006 from the underfunded Veterans Affairs Department that recently faced a shortfall of \$1 billion that jeopardized veterans' health care.

One of the officials to receive a top bonus of \$33,000 was the deputy undersecretary for benefits, who helps manage a disability claim system with a backlog of more than 600,000 cases and average delays of 177 days. Annual bonuses to senior VA officials averaged more than \$16,000 for 2006 and are the highest awarded in government.

"It is simply unacceptable that veterans are waiting longer and longer for benefits they desperately need while senior staff members in charge of bad policy are rewarded so-called performance bonuses," Hall said. "These bonuses are a deeply flawed approach to the principle of pay for performance."

The VA's fiscal year 2007 bonuses are currently set to be determined in September of this year and paid soon after.

The Pay Veterans First Act would prevent the payment of these bonuses to certain top level VA officials in charge of policy unless the VA reduces the claims backlog to fewer than 100,000 cases.

"My bill will prevent the 'CEOs' at the VA in charge of policymaking from receiving bonuses until they make the improvements that veterans deserve," explained Hall.

Hall's legislation is scheduled to come before the House of Representatives for a vote tomorrow.